

Citation for published version:

Lees, C 2011, 'How unusual is the United Kingdom Coalition (and what are the chances of it happening again)?', *Political Quarterly*, vol. 82, no. 2, pp. 279-292. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-923X.2011.02192.x>

DOI:

[10.1111/j.1467-923X.2011.02192.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-923X.2011.02192.x)

Publication date:

2011

Document Version

Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication](#)

The definitive version is available at wileyonlinelibrary.com

University of Bath

Alternative formats

If you require this document in an alternative format, please contact:
openaccess@bath.ac.uk

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

How unusual is the UK Coalition (and what are the chances of it happening again)?

Charles Lees
University of Sheffield

Abstract

This article draws upon insights from theoretical and empirical studies of coalition behaviour in multi-party politics to examine the formation of the UK coalition following the General Election of 6th May 2010. It argues that (1) the formation of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition is not unusual in historical terms or in the context of contemporary European politics; and (2) that although it is a break from the more recent pattern of post-war British politics it nevertheless does conform to our expectations in the light of the coalition literature. The article also provides a comparative analysis of the impact of Britain's 'First-Past-The-Post' (FPTP) electoral system on party competition and an examination of the performance of the Alternative Vote (AV) system and argues that (1) if the UK retains FPTP then a return to single-party government in 2015 is highly likely; and (2) it is not inevitable that the introduction of AV would significantly advantage the Liberal Democrats.

Key Words: Conservative Party, Liberal Democrats, Coalition Government, Electoral Systems, Alternative Vote.

Introduction

This article poses a simple question and a speculative corollary to that question. And while the corollary is a little harder to answer, in a sense the main question is a rather more straightforward proposition. In the context of UK political history, coalitions are not usual. Disraeli may have argued in 1852 that ‘England does not like coalitions’, but that same year saw the formation of the 1852-55 Aberdeen Ministry, made up of the Peelites and the Whigs. Moreover the first half of the 20th century saw over 20 years of coalition government; starting with the Asquith and Lloyd George governments of 1915-1922, through various ‘National Governments’ under MacDonald, Baldwin, and Chamberlain between 1931 and 1939, followed by the short-lived Chamberlain ‘War Government’ of 1939-1940, and ending with highly successful Churchill Coalition of 1940-1945. Such coalitions formed in the context of crises for the nation (the Great War and its aftermath, the 1930s Depression, the Second World War) or, more prosaically, crises for the political parties themselves. So in that sense coalition government is not alien to the British political tradition at all and it is interesting to note that David Cameron, with characteristic political intuition, harked back to these earlier coalitions by harnessing a narrative of national crisis and the need to govern ‘in the national interest’ during the coalition negotiations and early days of his government.

Having said that, it remains true that in the context of post-war British politics coalition governments are indeed unusual. In this the UK has been different from continental Europe where, since 1945, some countries have been ruled exclusively by coalition governments, most have been ruled by a mixture of coalition and single-party government, and even an outlier like Spain, although nominally ruled exclusively by single-party governments, has been characterised by nationalist and regionalist parties acting as support parties to those governments. So does the formation of the current UK coalition indicate a ‘normalisation’, as it were, of British party politics? And if the coalition was to survive more than one political cycle – in other words, if it were to happen again – would this mean that we are now entering an era in which party politics becomes more ‘European’, based on a more consensual and cooperative style of government?

To answer these questions, this article draws upon insights from theoretical and empirical studies of coalition behaviour in multi-party politics. The reader will be aware of the apocryphal French philosopher who chided his American colleague by saying ‘Well yes, it works in practice, but will it work in theory?’ and there are times when the academic literature on coalition behaviour seems guilty of prioritising theory over common sense. But the best work in this sometimes challenging area of political science does help us judge which particular coalitions are likely to form and gives us the ability to make predictions about the outcomes of coalition ‘games’; even in political systems about which we know very little. The next section of this article focuses on the process of coalition formation in May 2010, using a selection of analytical concepts derived from the coalition literature. It examines the structural drivers of coalition behaviour, both in terms of shares of seats and in terms of party programmes, and assesses the extent to which the real-world process of coalition negotiations following the General Election of 6th May 2010 conforms to our expectations in the light of the academic literature. This is followed by a second section, in which I use a comparative analysis of the impact of Britain’s ‘First-Past-The-Post’ (FPTP) electoral system on party competition to speculate about the chances of the UK coalition surviving beyond the next election. This also includes an examination of the performance of the Alternative Vote (AV) system, which Nick Clegg hopes might be the ‘game changer’ for the Liberal Democrats and which has been used by Australia in all elections to its lower house, the House of Representatives, since 1918. Finally, the article concludes with a summary and synthesis of the arguments made.

So, is the UK coalition unusual?

The literature on coalition behaviour is conceptually diverse and much early work relies upon insights derived from game theory, which portrays politicians as hard-nosed ‘office seekers’ with little regard for ideology. Some scholars argue that political parties are rational office-seeking actors and coalition ‘games’ take place under conditions that are both ‘constant sum’ (limited in size and scope) and ‘zero-sum’ (one player’s gain diminishes the potential benefits of all other players).¹ The effectiveness of any political party playing the game depends upon the resources, in the form of parliamentary seats, which it brings to it. The bargaining power these seats generate are captured by ‘power indices’, such as the Banzhaf index², which is expressed as a fraction of all swing votes (in which the outcome of a vote on a bill could be changed from ‘voted for’ to ‘voted-down’) each party is able to cast. A comparison of all parties’ voting power allows us to calculate the so-called ‘effective number of parties’: the number of parties with the potential to determine the outcome of the coalition game.³

Riker builds upon the game theoretical work of von Neumann and Morgenstern and predicts that players will try to create coalitions that are only as large as they believe will ensure winning: a so-called ‘Minimal-’ or even ‘Minimum-Winning’ coalition. Leiserson, by contrast, argues that, in order to avoid unnecessary conflict and co-ordination problems, parties will want to be in the coalition with the smallest possible number of coalition partners: the so-called ‘bargaining proposition’.

These early office-seeking models of coalition behaviour were criticised for being ‘policy blind’ and subsequent scholarship introduced a policy dimension to the coalition game. Two of the most cited examples of this turn towards ideology are the work of Robert Axelrod and Abram de Swaan.⁴ Axelrod assumes that, whilst parties want to be a member of as small a coalition as possible, the members of the coalition that eventually forms will not only share a degree of common ideological ground but also that all coalition partners will be ‘connected’: that is, there will be no parties left outside the coalition with the potential to drive an ideological wedge between parties inside the coalition. These so-called ‘Minimal Connected Winning’ coalitions are assumed to be as large as necessary to secure a majority in parliament. De Swaan builds upon Axelrod’s assumptions and argues that players will prefer to be members of the Minimal Connected Winning coalition with the smallest ideological range. De Swaan also stresses the notion of the so-called ‘median legislator’; the member who is located at the numerical centre of parliament and without whom no connected coalition can wield a majority. Because party discipline is assumed to be important, the political party to which the median legislator in parliament belongs must be included in any majority coalition. Similarly, the party that ‘owns’ the median legislator within the coalition will be crucial in shaping the new coalition’s programme for government. And if any party owns the median legislator in both parliament and coalition, it is considered to be decisive in determining the coalition’s potential composition, programme, and stability.

Axelrod and de Swaan’s work portrayed ideology in Left-Right terms and more recent work on the ideological drivers of the coalition game has expanded the ‘policy space’ to include multiple ideological dimensions, such as libertarianism versus authoritarianism or centralisation versus decentralisation. The use of these so-called ‘dimension-by-dimension medians’⁵ has yielded many useful insights but it should be pointed out that plotting political parties’ relative positions in Left-Right terms remains the best predictor of real-world coalition outcomes.⁶ I argue that there are three reasons for this. First, political leaders playing the coalition game do not have the time or inclination to make complex multi-dimensional calculations about their potential coalition partners.

Second, the parties these individuals lead impose considerable constraints on leaders' room for manoeuvre and further limit the kind of calculations they can make. Finally, all players in the coalition game – and the parties they lead – are subject to what economists call 'pure time preference'.⁷ Put simply, this means that like the rest of us, politicians place greater value on benefits they can gain now or in the near future over those that might require more time to bring to fruition. The incentives to discount future benefits are, of course, made more compelling by the electoral cycle and the need for politicians to be able to demonstrate tangible successes to the electorate before the next election. As we shall see, there may be exceptions that prove the rule when for contingent reasons the Left-Right dimension is neutralised but, under normal circumstances, Left-Right issues such as taxation, spending, and redistribution allow politicians to get early 'runs on the board' in a fashion that can be conveyed to voters in quantifiable cash terms. Pure time preference also has two additional effects. First, it compels politicians to place more value on the instant gratification of the trappings of office over longer-term policy gains. Second, it pre-disposes them to prefer 'tried-and-tested' coalition arrangements as they have lower opportunity costs compared with those that are less familiar or even untried.

TABLE ONE ABOUT HERE

So what does this review of some of the key analytical tools from the coalition literature tell us about the current UK coalition government? Table one draws upon the concepts discussed above to analyse the coalition game following the General Election of 6th May 2010. The analysis excludes Sinn Féin, which does not recognise the authority of the UK Parliament and did not take up the five seats it won in the General Election. This leaves 10 players made up of nine parties (Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrats, DUP, SNP, Plaid Cymru, SDLP, Alliance, and Greens), plus the independent MP Sylvia Herman. In pure numerical terms there are 1024 (two to the power of ten) potential coalition outcomes, of which 506 are majority coalitions, including 15 Minimal Winning Coalitions. Moving on to the Banzhaf index, each player has a score based on their seat share and these scores range from a high of 0.3626 for the Conservative Party to lows of 0.0069 for Caroline Lucas of the Greens and Sylvia Herman. The Banzhaf scores demonstrate that bargaining power is concentrated between the Conservative Party, of course, and the Labour Party and Liberal Democrats, both of which have scores of 0.2286. This distribution is reflected in the score for the effective number of parties, which is 2.57. So, in practical terms, there were four feasible coalition outcomes:

- First, a 'Rainbow Coalition' made up of Labour, Liberal Democrats, SNP, Plaid Cymru, SDLP, Alliance, Green and, possibly, Sylvia Herman. This would yield a majority of eight or nine respectively.
- Second, a tighter minority coalition, dominated by the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats, with formal or informal support from the Alliance, SDLP, and possibly Sylvia Herman.
- Third, a minority Conservative government, possibly supported on 'confidence and supply' by the Liberal Democrats. This would fall 17 seats short of a working majority.
- Fourth, a Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition with a working majority of 41 seats.

The precise modalities of these various outcomes and their practicality in the real-world politics of Westminster are discussed at greater length by Marc Debus and, in particular, by Tim Bale

elsewhere in this volume. What I argue here is that the eventual Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition is the only potential coalition outcome consistent with the analytical tools described earlier. In other words, we can argue that the UK coalition is not unusual at all. There are five reasons for this:

First, of the four outcomes, only the Rainbow Coalition and the Conservative-Liberal Democrat options yield a working majority. The two minority options, particularly the option of a minority Conservative government with Liberal Democrat support on confidence and supply, would not have been impossible in May 2010 but, as Tim Bale argues, there are a number of procedural reasons why such arrangements would have been unstable and no doubt short-lived. Second, although the Rainbow Coalition is the Minimal Winning Coalition with the smallest majority, it would have required the participation of seven parties and possibly one independent and therefore does not satisfy the bargaining proposition that stipulates that parties will try to join coalitions with the smallest possible number of coalition partners. By contrast, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat option is also a Minimal Winning Coalition and, as it only requires the involvement of two political parties, this option also satisfies Leiserson's bargaining proposition.

Third, if we introduce the notion of ideological connectedness then the Rainbow Coalition is the Minimal Connected Winner. But given the range of parties involved, we must assume that the ideological range of such a coalition would be large; with all of the problems in forging a common programme associated with this. Under these circumstances, it is not unreasonable to assume that the Conservative-Liberal Democrat option is the Minimal Connected Winner with the smallest ideological range. But, in practical terms, what does this mean? Using data derived from the Conservative and Liberal Democrat election manifestos, Marc Debus demonstrates that the two parties are connected along what he calls the 'centralisation-decentralisation' ideological dimension. This connectedness is certainly evident in the coalition's enthusiasm for themes such as promoting the 'big society', rolling back the State, and devolving responsibility for many aspects of policy delivery down to local government and other stakeholders. And in the context of the analytical concepts used in this article, it could be argued that the constraints placed upon any incoming government by the state of the UK's finances in May 2010 served to limit the kind of 'tax and spend' policies that would have underpinned the Liberal Democrats' ideological connectedness (with Labour) along the Left-Right dimension. In other words, one might conclude that because of the contingencies of the economic crisis the Left-Right dimension was temporarily neutralised as the key ideological dimension along which political coalitions form. However, I take a different tack and argue that the Left-Right dimension remained central to politicians' calculations in May 2010. This is consistent with Tim Bale and Mark Oaten's assertions that, following the elite takeover of the Liberal Democrats by Nick Clegg and other colleagues associated with the party's 'Orange Book' tendency; by May 2010 the Liberal Democrats had moved to the political right and the party was positioned between the Conservative and the Labour Party on the Left-Right axis. As the subsequent widespread sense of betrayal over the party's high profile election pledge on university tuition fees demonstrates, the constraints imposed on the leadership by the Liberal Democrats' internal democratic structures prevented this ideological shift from being reflected in the party's 2010 election manifesto. Nevertheless, Bale's contention that the 'economic liberals' had captured the party is highly plausible and would explain why, in the months following the formation of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition, the enthusiasm of Nick Clegg, Danny Alexander and, briefly, David Laws for 'rebalancing' the economy, rolling back the public sector and aggressively tackling the UK's budget deficit often seemed the equal of that displayed by their Conservative colleagues.

Fourth, the ideological positioning of the Liberal Democrats and their ability to engage with the Conservatives as well as Labour is reflected in the fact that, following the 2010 General Election, the party owned the median legislator in the Commons. This attribute, even more than the party's strong Banzhaf score described earlier, made the Liberal Democrats decisive in the coalition game because the party's cooperation was required in the formation of any majority connected coalition. This was a fact that David Cameron, with his audacious 'big, open offer' to the Liberal Democrats on the 7th of May, seemed to grasp far more quickly than Gordon Brown. But the respective size of the two parties meant that the Conservatives owned the median legislator within the subsequent coalition and, the model suggests, this attribute offsets the influence enjoyed by the Liberal Democrats. This balance between median legislators in parliament and coalition is quite common in other countries and is assumed to have an impact on the tone of coalition negotiations and the subsequent division of ministerial portfolios. As Akash Paun describes in this volume, the division of portfolios in the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition sees the Liberal Democrats punching above their weight in simple numerical terms but failing to secure the key 'blue-chip' portfolios (Chancellor of the Exchequer, Home Secretary, Foreign Secretary) that define the direction of travel of any government. This over-representation is consistent with established patterns found in countries with a longer tradition of coalition government, such as Germany.⁸

Finally, I argue that the outcome of the coalition game also satisfies the assumption of 'pure time preference', in which politicians – for reasons of human nature as well as the demands of the electoral cycle – favour office-seeking over policy considerations and, subsequently, prefer policies with shorter time horizons over those with longer-term benefits. It also implies that politicians will gravitate towards 'tried-and-tested' coalition arrangements rather than those that are less familiar. This is certainly the case with the Conservative-Liberal Democrat option, which had already become commonplace in town halls across the country, from Reading to the Wirral. This is not the case with the Rainbow Coalition option. In terms of individual politicians' motives, however, it is not possible to construct windows into the souls of Nick Clegg and his colleagues in order to determine if the decision to enter into coalition with the Conservatives was an exercise in naked office-seeking. We can, however, argue that the programme they agreed with their Conservative colleagues does reflect the need to get those early 'runs on the board'. For, counter-intuitive as it might seem, the scale and timing of the Chancellor's budget savings do indicate a desire to hit the ground running, as does the speed (some might say haste) of reform in other areas such as education and health. Moreover, even the Liberal Democrats' decision to ditch their long-standing commitment to the Single Transferable Vote (STV) in favour of a referendum on the more limited AV is consistent with a determination to not make the best the enemy of the good. Whether the decision to opt for AV will actually be in the best interests of the Liberal Democrats is discussed in the next section of this article but it is part of a wider pattern. For when the Cameron government's policy programme is taken in the round and examined in the context of the coalition's desire to introduce five-year fixed term parliaments, what becomes obvious is that it is based around a limited number of clear policy objectives that are achievable within one electoral cycle and where it is assumed that the benefits anticipated from them will become apparent before the government has to once again face the voters. Clearly, both Cameron and Clegg are confident that they will be able to campaign on the coalition's record five years hence but, if one was to make one (non-partisan) criticism of the current government, it is that the focus on the short-to medium-term is at the cost of a longer-term narrative about what Britain might look and feel like in, say, a decade from now.

How likely is it to happen again?

Does this lack of a longer term narrative matter? Is the current UK coalition a one-off political arrangement willed into existence by two pragmatic party leaders as a reaction to the legislative arithmetic following the 2010 General Election? Or might it become a more permanent arrangement? In short, how likely is it to happen again? Political scientists are no better than economists at forecasting future developments and much will depend on contingent factors such as the performance of the Cameron government, how the two constituent parties fair in the opinion polls, whether the two parties agree some form of electoral pact at the next election, as well as the impact, malign or otherwise, unforeseen or anticipated, of what Harold Macmillan referred to as 'events'. Nevertheless, on the basis of what we know about the past performance of Britain's FPTP electoral system and also about the performance of the only alternative on offer, AV, we can make one or two tentative observations that help us assess the probability of the UK coalition surviving more than one electoral cycle.

Starting with FPTP, the reason why there was a coalition game at all in May 2010 was because Britain's electoral system failed in its major task: to convert the largest party's plurality of votes in the country into a working majority at Westminster. Despite the failure of the Conservative Party on this occasion, however, FPTP remains a highly disproportionate electoral system that favours the larger political parties and/or those parties with more limited electoral support that is not diffused across the electorate but rather sufficiently concentrated in geographical terms to win parliamentary seats. This is in stark contrast to STV or List PR systems.

FIGURE ONE ABOUT HERE

To demonstrate this, Figure One shows the relationship between the disproportionality of electoral systems and the effective number of parties in the Commons, and also in the lower houses of the other European countries. Electoral proportionality is measured by the so-called 'least squares index', devised by the political scientist Michael Gallagher, which measures the disparity between the distribution of votes cast in elections and the subsequent allocation of seats.⁹ The higher the least squares score the more disproportionate the system is judged to be. The data is based on year-on-year means over the twenty years from 1990 until the eve of the 2010 General Election and the trend line demonstrates that as a general rule the more disproportionate the electoral system, the lower the effective number of parties within parliament.¹⁰

As is apparent from figure 1, over the course of the last two decades the UK electoral system has been one of the most disproportionate (second to France) and has generated the joint smallest average effective number of parties (along with Greece). What is also clear is that those countries that have always been governed by coalitions (marked by green squares in the figure) or have been governed by a mixture of coalitions and single-party government (marked by blue diamonds) tend to have far more proportional electoral systems and generate a larger effective number of parties. Crucially when assessing the significance of the May 2010 General Election, the data for it are not far out of line from the UK averages since 1990. In the 2010 election the least squares score was 15.1 (down slightly from the average of 15.9) and, as already discussed, the effective number of parties was 2.57 (up slightly from 2.3). This does not suggest that May 2010 represented a sea-change in the underlying dynamics of the UK party system and, on the basis of past performance, one must conclude that if the UK retains its FPTP electoral system then a return to single-party government in 2015 is highly likely.

FIGURE TWO ABOUT HERE

But what happens if Nick Clegg manages to win the planned referendum on AV in 2011? Leaving aside doubts as to whether the referendum can be won, would the introduction of AV indeed be a game changer for the Liberal Democrats? Figure Two also plots the relationship between the disproportionality of electoral systems and the effective number of parties in the Commons and the other European lower houses but introduces two new perspectives: the pointers now denote the *type* of electoral system in each country and now include an additional country, Australia, which as was discussed in the introduction to this article, uses AV for elections to the House of Representatives.

Like FPTP and indeed the ‘two-round system’ (TRS) used in France, AV is a ‘plurality-majority’ electoral system. Like FPTP it retains the so-called ‘constituency link’, in which single members of parliament represent single constituencies. However, there are three key ways in which AV differs from FPTP that, it is argued, might offer hope to the Liberal Democrats.

First, unlike FPTP, under AV voters are given the chance to rank candidates according to preference rather than cast their vote for just one candidate. If a candidate wins a majority of the ‘first preference’ votes then he or she is elected but, in the absence of such a clear majority, the preferences of the candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated and their preferences re-distributed to the remaining candidates. This process is repeated until a clear winner emerges. Thus, AV is designed to produce majorities for winning candidates in parliamentary seats rather than just a plurality of votes. This means that it better reflects the preferences of voters in those seats and, as result, has been called a ‘fairer’ system than FPTP. However, this does not mean that the outcome of constituency votes under AV would necessarily differ greatly from that which might have been achieved under FPTP. As the Australian political scientist Colin Hughes points out, preferences had to be re-distributed in 30.8 of constituencies over the course of 33 elections to the Australian House of Representatives between 1919 and 2001 but this only resulted in a different outcome from that achieved under FPTP in 5.9 per cent of the constituencies¹¹. Thus, on the evidence from Australia, the chances of a party ‘coming through the middle’ to take a seat appears limited. It remains to be seen if this would also be the case in the UK.

Second, unlike FPTP and TRS, the majoritarian effects of AV do not necessarily extend to the aggregate level. In other words, AV is not explicitly designed to produce parliamentary majorities and as a rule Australian governments have not enjoyed the huge parliamentary majorities enjoyed by, say, Margaret Thatcher or Tony Blair. However, this does not necessarily mean that the Liberal Democrats would benefit. For example, as Figure Two demonstrates, whilst AV as it operates in Australia is notably less disproportionate than FPTP in the UK (an average score of 10.1 over the last twenty years, compared with 15.9), the difference is not enormous and AV remains considerably more disproportionate than the Liberal Democrats’ former preference of STV, or indeed other proportional systems such as List PR or Mixed Member Proportional systems. This is reflected in the effective number of parties for Australia, which at an average of 2.42 is only slighter larger than the 2.3 found in the UK. Indeed, although for historical reasons (notably the difficulty of reconciling urban and rural interests in a massive and diverse continent) the right wing of Australian politics is dominated by a semi-permanent ‘Coalition’ dominated by the (predominantly urban and suburban) Liberals and the (rural) National Party, it should be regarded as a de facto single actor, like the Christian Democratic CDU/CSU in Germany. The Coalition is currently in opposition to a single-party minority government of the Australian Labor Party (ALP)

and the political tone since at least 1945 has very much been one of an adversarial 'two party dominant' politics and responsible government rather than the consensual continental-style coalition politics desired by the Liberal Democrats.

FIGURE THREE ABOUT HERE

It is of course true that there is no guarantee that the pattern of politics found in Australia would be repeated in the UK and, whilst some studies have suggested that the Liberal Democrats would have benefited greatly in recent elections, it has also been argued that the Conservative Party could be the big winner in the future.¹² So the jury is out on AV but what we do know is that *if* the patterns found in Australia were replicated in the UK then the results could be disappointing for the Liberal Democrats. Nor can the Liberal Democrats take comfort from the idea that this squeeze of third parties is down to the vagaries of Australian political culture. Figure Three compares the effective number of parties in the Australian House of Representatives (elected by AV) and Senate (elected by STV) over the period 1990 to 2010. The two chambers have different electoral cycles, with members of the House serving three-year terms, whilst Senators serve six year terms with half of the Senate elected every three years. However, Figure 3 demonstrates clearly that over the period STV produced a higher average effective number of parties in the Senate (3.01) than AV produced in the House of Representatives (2.42). Thus, Australia does have the kind of genuine multi-party system that the Liberal Democrats claim to favour. But it is not to be found in the House of Representatives under the AV system the party now favours but rather in the Senate, where in recent years senators from the ALP, the Coalition, and also Greens, Democrats and independents have been elected by STV.

Conclusions

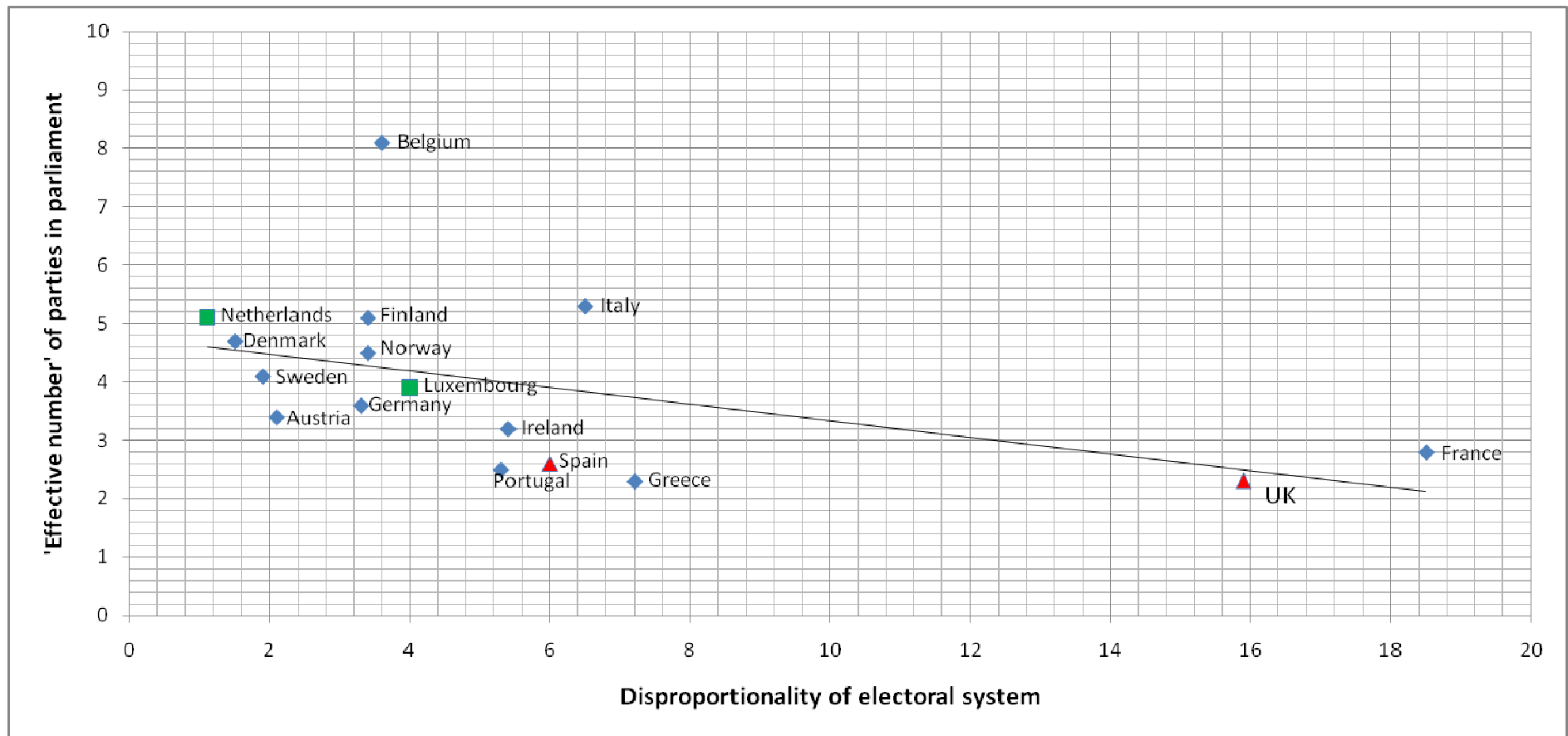
This article has argued that the formation of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition is not unusual in historical terms, nor is it in the context of contemporary European politics. It also argues that although it is a break from the more recent pattern of post-war British politics it nevertheless does conform to our expectations in the light of the coalition literature. So, on balance, the UK coalition is not unusual.

But does this break from the recent pattern represent a real change in Britain's style of government or is it a one-off event, brought about by a rare distribution of parliamentary seats in this parliament, and after which normal service will be resumed? In other words, what are the chances of it happening again? Of course, if the Liberal Democrats do reap the electoral benefits of being seen as a realistic party of government and/or if there is a similar distribution of seats at the next General Election then, of course, it can happen again. But, as this article demonstrates, under Britain's existing FPTP system or, I would argue, even under AV, the evidence suggests that it is reasonable to suspect that David Cameron rather than Nick Clegg will be the more optimistic about his prospects of remaining in government after 2015.

Table 1. Exploring the Coalition Game following 6 May 2010 General Election

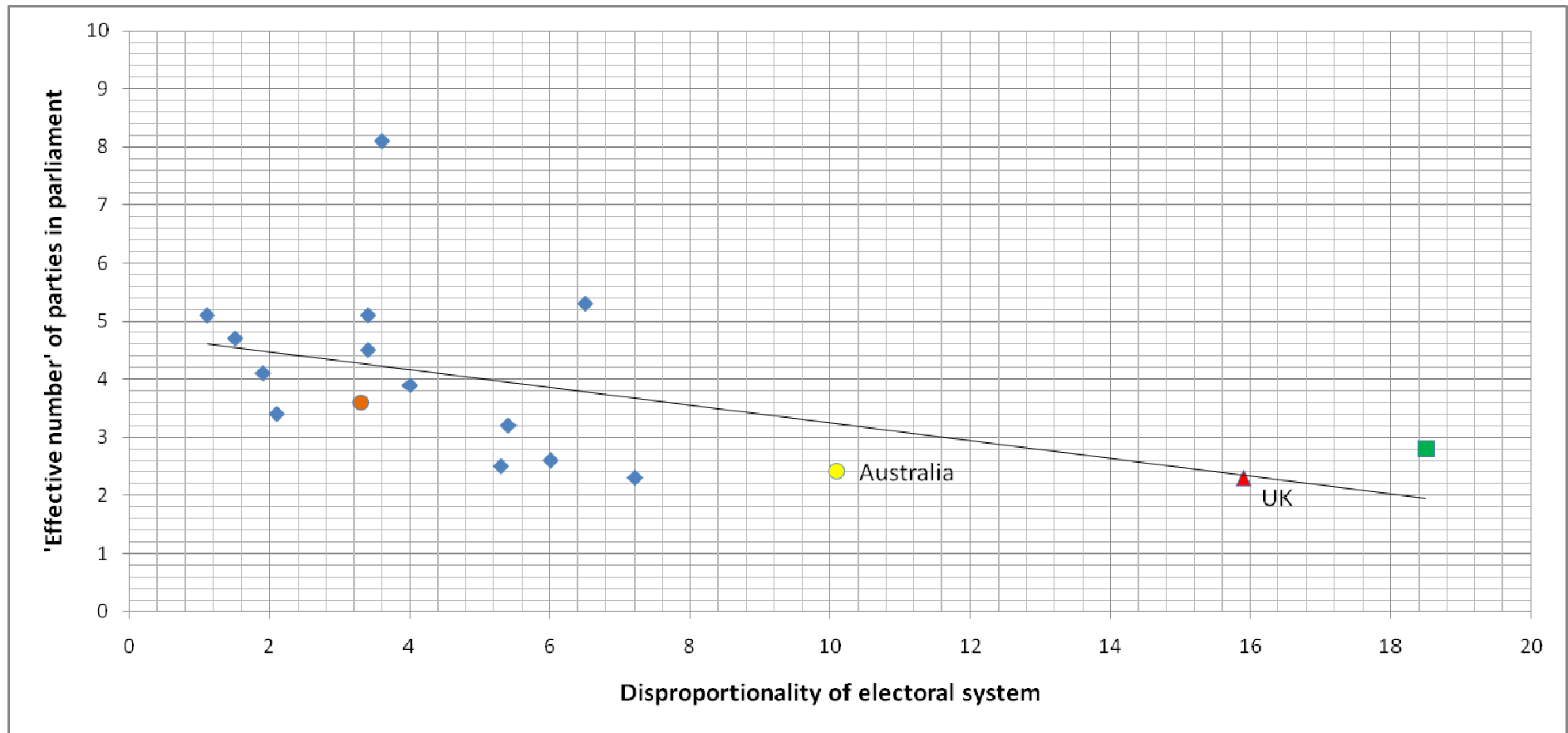
<u>Party</u>	Sinn Féin	Green	SNP	Plaid	Alliance	SDLP	Ind	Labour	LibDem	Con	DUP
<u>Seats</u>	(5)	1	6	3	1	3	1	258	57	306	8
<u>Working Majority</u>	323										
<u>Potential numerical outcomes</u>	1024										
<u>Minimal Winners</u>	15										
<u>Banzhaf index</u>	0.0000	0.0069	0.0554	0.0185	0.0069	0.0185	0.0069	0.2286	0.2286	0.3626	0.0670
<u>'Effective number' of parties</u>	3.71										
<u>Bargaining Proposition</u>	LibDem Con										
<u>Minimal Connected Winner</u>	Green SNP Plaid Alliance SDLP Ind Labour LibDem										
<u>Minimal Connected Winner with smallest ideological range</u>	LibDem Con										
<u>Median Legislator in Parliament</u>	LibDem										
<u>Median Legislator in Coalition</u>	Con										
<u>Tried-and-tested coalition?</u>	Yes										
<u>Tried-and-tested alternatives?</u>	No										

Figure One. Relative disproportionality of electoral systems and 'effective number of parties' for UK and 15 European Party Systems



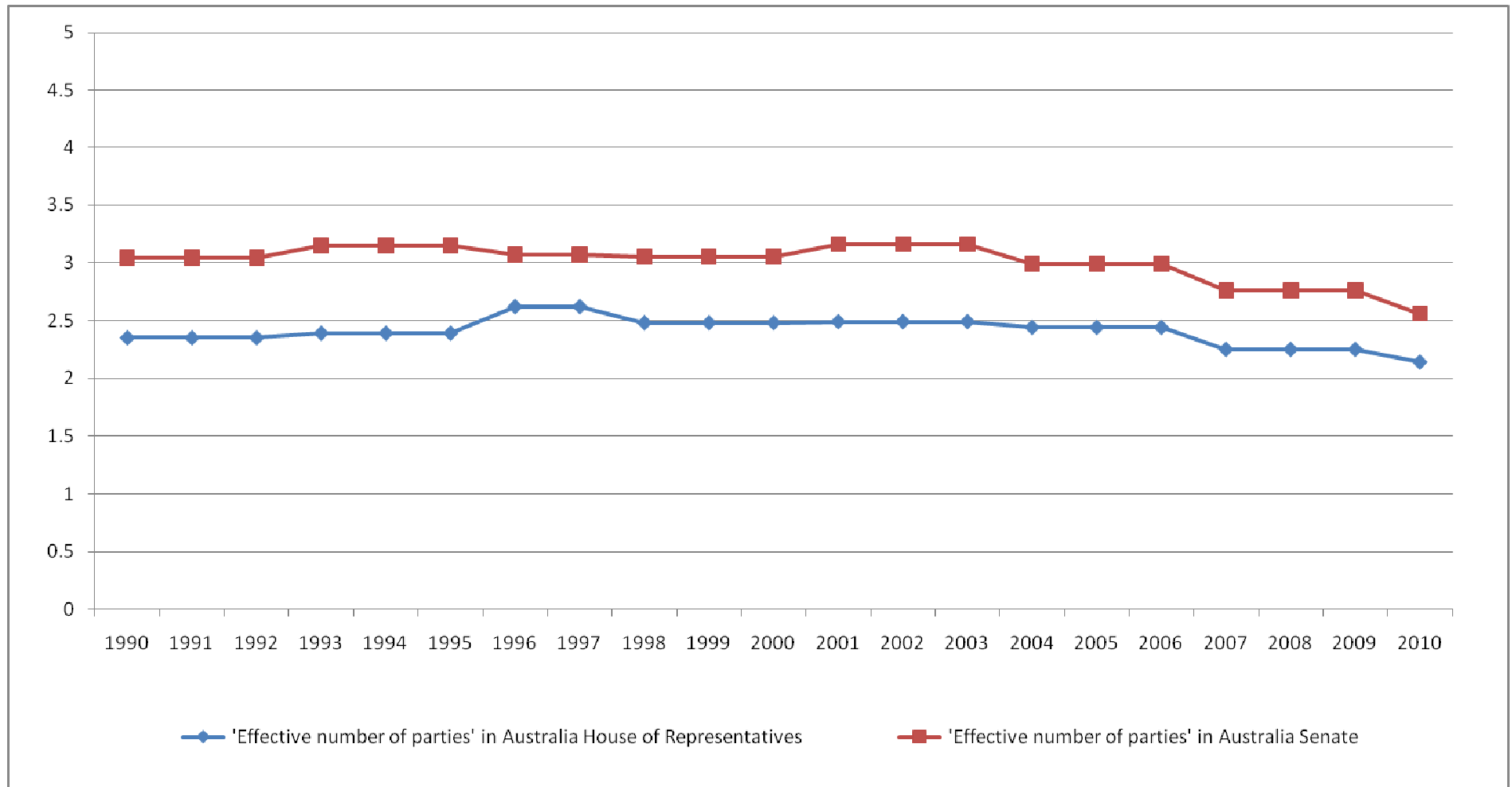
Key: ▲ Single Party Government; ◆ Single Party and Coalition Government; ■ Coalition Government

Figure Two. Relative disproportionality of electoral systems and 'effective number of parties': UK and Australia compared



Key: ▲ First-Past-the-Post; ■ Two-round system; ● Mixed system; ◆ PR (List or STV); ● Alternative Vote

Figure Three. Effective number of parties for Australian House of Representatives (AV) and Australian Senate (STV), 1990-2010



Notes

¹ J. von Neuman and O. Morgenstern (1944), *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior* (Princeton: Princeton University Press); W. Riker (1962), *The Theory of Political Coalitions* (New Haven: Yale University Press); M. Leiserson (1968), 'Factions and coalitions in one-party Japan: an interpretation based on the Theory of Games', *American Political Science Review*, 62 (3): 770-787

² See J-F. Banzhaf III (1965), 'Weighted voting doesn't work: a mathematical analysis', *Rutgers Law Review*, 19: 317-43; also L. Penrose (1946), 'The elementary statistics of majority voting', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society* 109 (1): 53-57.

³ M. Laakso and R. Taagepera (1979), 'Effective' number of parties: a measure with application to west Europe', *Comparative Political Studies* 12 (1): 3-27.

⁴ R. Axelrod (1973), *Conflict of Interest* (Chicago: Markham); A. de Swaan (1973), *Coalition Theories and Cabinet Formation* (Amsterdam: Elsevier).

⁵ N. Schofield (1996), 'The heart of a polity', in N. Schofield (ed.) *Collective Decision-Making: Social Choice and Political Economy* (Boston MA: Kluwer), pp. 183-220; N. Schofield (1995), 'Coalition politics: a formal model and empirical analysis', *Journal of Theoretical Politics*, 7: 245-81; N. Schofield (1993), 'Political competition and multi-party coalition government', *European Journal of Political Research* 23: 1-33; M. Laver and K. Shepsle (1990), 'Coalitions and Cabinet Government', *American Political Science Review* 84:873-90.

⁶ See P. Warwick (2001), 'Coalition policy in parliamentary democracies; who gets how much and why?', *Comparative Political Studies* 34: 1212-36; also I. Budge and M. Laver (1993), 'The policy basis of government coalitions: a comparative investigation', *British Journal of Political Science* 23: 499-519; I. Budge and M. Laver (1992), 'The relationship between party and coalition policy in Europe. A synthesis', in M. Laver and I. Budge (eds.) *Party Policy and Government Coalitions* (New York: St Martin's Press).

⁷ S. Frederick, G. Loewenstein and T. O'Donoghue (2002), 'Time discounting and time preference: a critical review', *Journal of Economic Literature*, 40 (2): 351-401; S. Anand and A. Sen (2000), 'Human development and economic sustainability', *World Development* 28 (12): 2029-2049.

⁸ C. Lees (2000), *The Red-Green Coalition in Germany: Politics, Personalities and Power* (Manchester: MUP).

⁹ M. Gallagher (1991), 'Proportionality, disproportionality and electoral systems', *Electoral Studies*, 10 (1): 33-51.

¹⁰ Available at the Electoral Systems

Website: http://www.tcd.ie/Political_Science/staff/michael_gallagher/ElSystems/index.php

¹¹ C. A. Hughes (2007), 'Electoral systems' in B. Galligan and W. Roberts(eds.), *The Oxford Companion to Australian Politics* (Oxford: OUP).

¹² J. Curtice (2010) 'This could make Cameron the winner from electoral reform', *The Independent Online*. 4 November. <http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/john-curtice-this-could-make-cameron-the-winner-from-electoral-reform-2124667.html>. Accessed 14 December 2010.